



Appropriations Committee
Public Hearing of February 15, 2022

House Bill No. 5037 (Governor's Bill) – AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2023.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the **National Audubon Society** through its affiliate state office, Audubon Connecticut. My name is Robert LaFrance and I am Audubon Connecticut's Director of Policy.

Audubon Connecticut protects birds and the places they need, today and tomorrow, using science, bipartisan issue advocacy, education, and on-the-ground conservation. Our conservation network extends statewide and includes nearly 32,000 members, five Connecticut chapters, and many partners along the Atlantic Flyway. Audubon's policy work is grounded in—and informed by—science. At Audubon, our core values demand that our work advance justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

In 2019, [Audubon's Survival by Degrees](#) report sounded a stark warning: Without meaningful action to mitigate the impacts of climate change, two-thirds of North American bird species are at risk of extinction. Then, in 2021, Audubon's [Natural Climate Solutions Report](#) provided a scientific framework to help us address this existential threat.

National Audubon Society's scientists have established that climate change is the greatest threat to birds. Our research shows that roughly half of all North American bird species are threatened with the loss of at least 50 percent of their current range by 2080. And, two-thirds of North American birds studied—389 out of 604 species—may face unlivable climate conditions across most of their current ranges by 2080 if global temperatures remain on track to rise by 3 degrees Celsius (5.4 degrees Fahrenheit).

Through our conservation programs focused on Coasts, Community Conservation, Healthy Forests, and Climate, we are working to preserve habitat and protect bird species that are of state, national, and global concern—like the Piping Plover, Wood Thrush, and Salt Marsh Sparrow. It begins with birds, but our mission connects people to a much wider range of issues such as building a more resilient Long Island Sound, restoring a healthier, natural balance to urban places by bringing back green habitats, managing our forests and wetlands to sequester carbon, reducing pesticide use, and promoting land conservation. Our goal is to reduce the impact of global climate change on birds, wildlife, and people.

House Bill No. 5037 - (Governor's Bill) – AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2023:

For many years the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection's (DEEP's) Budget has relied upon a complicated set of sources of funds to provide the financial resources to run the agency (e.g., the General Fund, non-lapsing funds like the Passport to Parks, federal funds, etc.). DEEP's Budget is even more complicated this year because of section 7 of House Bill No. 5037. Section 7 allocates, in accordance with the provisions of Special Act 21-15, federal funds of limited duration pursuant to the provisions of section 602 of Subtitle M of Title IX of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, P.L. 117-2.

Clearly, allocation of these federal American Rescue Plan funds to DEEP is a welcome addition from the Governor's Budget to DEEP. However, we are concerned that these limited duration funds may shift agency priorities in the short run. We ask the Conservation and Development Subcommittee (and the Appropriations Committee as a whole) to focus on the ongoing personnel needs of the agency. We have specific personnel concerns that we are sharing with Committee members today through this testimony.

Funding for DEEP's Branch of Environmental Conservation (EC) is simply not keeping pace with the ever expanding responsibilities that the EC Branch is being asked to perform. This means Connecticut is getting fewer and fewer environmental conservation professionals—like environmental scientists, biologists, foresters, and Environmental Conservation (EnCon) police officers—at a time when we need them the most.

DEEP's EnCon police officers are specially trained environmental professionals and they have been instrumental in allowing our residents and guests to safely access our state parks, forests and wildlife management areas during the COVID 19 pandemic. Many people have sought refuge in these natural areas as a way to cope with the difficulties and anxieties created by the COVID 19 virus. More than ever before Connecticut residents are visiting our state parks because of the very successful Passport to Parks program.

Yet, while visitor counts at state parks have drastically increased over the past few years (up 50% according to Commissioner Dykes), DEEP's EnCon police are not receiving the additional sworn officers that they desperately need to support those additional visitors. (It is important to note that DEEP has created an ENCON Ranger program to assist sworn officers, but this program is not sufficient to cover the public safety demands of our parks, campgrounds, and forests.)

Enforcing Connecticut's natural resource protection laws is one of the main responsibilities of EnCon Police. At Audubon, we view EnCon Police as our critical partner in wildlife protection and education. Audubon, other conservation organizations, and many municipal police forces rely EnCon police officers for their specialized training. So, when Audubon staff need help to, for example, protect piping plover nesting areas along the shoreline we call EnCon Police. Sometimes, because of other policing demands, EnCon is not able to respond in a timely way to

our requests. The number of full time EnCon officers is simply not sufficient to keep up with the expanding need for their services. **We respectfully request that you increase DEEP's funding and position count for EnCon Policy by at least 10 full time sworn officers over those included in the Governor's Budget proposal.**

Additionally, the need for adequate staffing for the EC branch becomes even more critical as DEEP works to advance our understating of Connecticut's natural resources--and the ecosystems services that those natural resources provide—as our climate continues to change. Please remember that we ask EC Branch scientists to perform natural resource and endangered species reviews in response to an ever increasing number of renewable energy siting requests (See CT Siting Council applicationsⁱ). And these same scientists are the ones who examine new scientific reports about how climate change is impacting Connecticut's coastal and inland natural resources.

Many students in Connecticut's colleges and universities are focusing their study on science and research to better understand how climate change will impact our State. As they graduate, these students are looking to pursue careers here in Connecticut in science and environmental conservation. Historically, DEEP would hire many of these students to create a team of EC professionals in state government. Unfortunately, DEEP's EC's team is eroding away because we are not recruiting enough new talent to be trained by the existing team of EC professionals at DEEP. In addition, many of the existing EC professionals at DEEP are retiring.

Let's reverse this trend and invest in Human Resources for DEEP's Branch of Environmental Conservation. We are asking that you provide DEEP with the General Fund financial resources and position count needed to hire a train at least 10 new EC professionals in the Bureau of Natural Resources.

In closing, the National Audubon Society relies upon the enormous generosity of our members and donors to keep our mission going. As a 501(c) not for profit entity the National Audubon Society manages many properties in Connecticut. We make these properties available to the public so that both residents and visitors alike can enjoy birds and an open space experience. These are Connecticut eco-tourism experiences where we provide natural resource and conservation education. The link below provides additional information about our centers, sanctuaries, properties and programs.<http://ct.audubon.org/about-us/centers-sancturies-and-chapters>

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on this proposal. Should you have any questions, please contact Robert LaFrance, Director of Policy, Audubon Connecticut, National Audubon Society, at Robert.LaFrance@Audubon.org (Cell 203.668.6685)

ⁱ https://portal.ct.gov/CSC/1_Applications-and-Other-Pending-Matters/Pending-Matters